

MAKING REQUESTS WITH MODALS

The speech act of making requests is quite complex in English. A speaker has to consider several factors before making a request that would be well received. First the speaker must consider the size of the request and the person who he or she is talking to. Then, the speaker must choose an appropriate modal based on these factors.

In English, the more polite the request, the longer and more buried the actual request is; a shorter, more direct request, however, is considered less polite. Look at the two examples here: *Give me your pen* versus *Would you be able to give me a pen, please?* In the first request, which is short and direct, no modal is present, but the request is quite clear. In the second request, two modals are used, making the request much longer and indirect—but also more formal and polite.

Knowing how to use modals when making requests is important for social interactions. For example, if a student makes a very short, direct request of a teacher, the teacher may see this request as impolite. Even if the student did not intend to be impolite, such a request may lower the teacher's opinion of the student. Like the student in this scenario, some students may find it difficult to know the rules of speech acts without explicit instruction. As a result, it is essential that teachers discuss the complexities of making requests.

In this week's Teacher's Corner, students engage in a fun and interactive activity in order to practice making appropriate requests. First, teachers will review the rules of making requests in English and then students will try making appropriate requests in a series of realistic scenarios.

LEVEL

High intermediate and above (some awareness of modal forms required)

LANGUAGE FOCUS

Speaking

Listening

GOALS

During this activity, students will be able to:

- Recognize the variables to consider when making context-appropriate requests in English
- Apply the rules of making requests to a set of scenarios to make appropriate requests

MATERIALS

- Paper and pencils/pens
- Set of scenarios (Appendix A)
- Set of respondents (Appendix B)

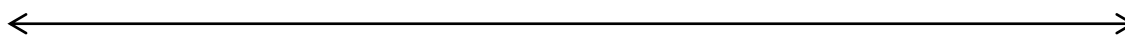
PREPARATION

- Prepare for students to work in teams of 8-10. (If the class has 10 or fewer students, have them work as a single group.)
- Put the following figure on the board:

Modals of Requests

Less direct

More direct



More polite

Less polite

ACTIVITY PART ONE: DIRECTNESS-POLITENESS CONTINUUM

1. Start class by telling students that today they are going to learn about making polite requests in English.
 - a. Explain that requests in English require a modal to be considered polite.
 - b. Ask students to give some examples of modals in English.
 - c. Write their responses on the board.
2. Ask students to turn to a neighbor and ask to borrow a pen. After they talk, have students share their requests with the class. Write their responses on the board.
 - a. If students are slow to respond, you can share some of the following examples: *Can I borrow a pen? Do you have a pen I can use? Give me a pen please. Would you lend me a pen?*
3. Explain to the class that in English, the more polite the request the less direct the request. Show them the figure on the board and explain that the continuum shown in the figure is one way to think about making polite requests.
4. Use one of the students' examples for demonstration. For example, point to the request: *Give me a pen, please*. Ask students if this request is direct or indirect. Then ask the students to describe the politeness of the request. If they had to choose, where would they put the request "Give me a pen, please" on the figure? Explain that the request is very direct, but not considered very polite in English.
5. Have students turn to their neighbor again. Tell students that they need to work together to organize the requests on the board along the continuum shown in the figure. Which request is the most polite, but least direct? Which is the most direct, but least polite? Where would you put the modals along this continuum?
6. As students finish, tell each pair to write a request along the continuum on the board.
7. As a class, review how the students organized the requests. Ask each pair to explain why they put their request in a particular spot.
 - a. As you work through each request, encourage students to challenge other students' choices.

- b. If necessary, explain that in English the order of politeness for modals is as follows, with the most polite listed first: *would, could, will, can*. Ensure that what is listed on the board follows this order.

ACTIVITY PART TWO: VARIABLES AFFECTING REQUESTS

1. Put students into the teams of 10 prepared before class. Have each team organize themselves into two rows of five facing each other so that each group member is facing another group member. Give each team a set of scenario cards (Appendix A) and pass them out so that each person has one.
2. Tell students they are going to practice making requests based on the scenarios in their hands.
3. Have the students read the scenarios aloud to the students sitting across from them. Then each student must prepare a request based on the scenario and make the request to the person across from him or her.
4. Tell the students they will have 1 minute to complete the task. When they hear the teacher clap, they must trade scenario cards, and students in one row must move one spot to the right while the students in the other row stay in the same spot.
 - a. Students will rotate through this game a minimum of five times in order to practice making requests.
 - b. While the students go through this activity, circulate and make note of some examples of requests.
5. After the time is up, ask students to return to their seats. Review some of the requests you heard students make, and ask students which requests are polite and which are direct.
6. Explain that you are now going to talk about some other considerations to make when making requests.

7. Return to the example, “Give me a pen, please,” and ask students to describe the size of the request.
Is asking for a pen a big request or a small request? In English, request size is based on how much the respondent has to do in order to fulfill the request.
 - a. Ask students what would happen if they changed the word *pen* for the word *car*. Would they ask the same way, or would they try to ask more politely? Which request phrase on the board would they choose if they were asking to borrow a car?
8. To bring in another variable, ask students how they would change the request “Give me a pen, please” if they were asking a teacher. What about a sibling or a close friend?
 - a. Explain that in making requests in English, the speaker also considers who the respondent is.
 - b. Again, change the word *pen* for the word *car* and tell students they are making the request to a grandparent. How would they make the request?
9. Ask students to return to their teams and to organize themselves again into rows of five facing each other. They will now do the same game again; however, this time they will consider a new variable: the respondent.
10. Hand out the second set of cards (Appendix B). Each person should get one respondent card in addition to his or her scenario card.
11. Tell students that the new card has a person listed. When they read their scenario card they must also read the person listed on the card.
12. Students must then make the request as if they are talking to the person listed on the card. For example, a student has a scenario card from the first game and now has a respondent card that says *teacher*. The student reading the scenario must then figure out how to make the request as though he or she is asking a teacher.
 - a. Remind students that the size of the request is important to consider as well.

13. Again, students will have 1 minute with their partners. At the end of the minute, students will switch cards with their partners. One row will move one spot to the right while the other row stays in the same place.
14. While the students continue this activity, teachers should circulate and make note of some examples of requests.
15. When the game is complete, have students return to their seats.
16. Point out some of the examples you heard. Ask students if the examples are appropriate requests based on the size of the request and the person being asked.
17. Give students time to ask questions and clear up any issues they still have about making requests in English.

VARIATIONS

Vary this activity by having students work through the activities in pairs rather than setting up the game with teams. In pairs, students can work through the scenarios, first through speaking and then by writing the requests they made. The written requests would give the teacher a chance to assess students' comprehension on an individual level.

EXTENSIONS

This activity can be extended to offer a homework opportunity. Have students record three requests they make outside of class. Students must write down the scenario, who the respondent is, and how they would make the request in English. Students must then bring these examples to share in class. For example, a student goes home and needs to ask a friend for a ride to the market. The student would then write down and bring to class something like the following: *I needed to ask my friend for a ride to the market. I know this friend pretty well. In English I would say, "Would you give me a ride to the market? I need to get some things for my mother."*

APPENDIX A

Scenarios for Making Requests

You need a ride to a concert 45 minutes from your city.	You need to borrow a nice dress for a wedding you are going to in a week.
You need to borrow a cup of sugar for a recipe you are making.	You need help moving a heavy table from one room to another room in your house.
You want to borrow a little money to buy some new art supplies.	You need someone to take your grandmother to a doctor's appointment because you are unavailable.
You need someone to watch your pets while you're on vacation.	You need a copy of the math book for school because you lost yours.
You need someone to hand you the salt at dinner.	You need a tissue to blow your nose.

APPENDIX B

Respondents for Requests Scenarios

Teacher	Supervisor
Mother	Uncle
Co-worker	Close friend
Classmate	Sibling
Family friend of parents	Stranger